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## ABSTRACT

A study examined the self-perceptions of college students regarding the effects of alcohol consumption on their interpersonal communication. Forty-seven subjects--the majority of whom were students majoring in health care studies--completed a 52-item Q-sort on alcohol and communication. Four person-types evolved: the social drinker, the nondrinker, the problem drinker, and the insecure drinker. Issues tapped in the Q-sort included: behavioral and perceptual changes, alcohol abuse, media influence anxiety reduction, family influences, self-disclosure, and social interaction. (One table of data is included; 55 references and the complete array of Q-sort statements are attached.) (Author/SR)

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Interpersonal Communication Interaction

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RUNNING HEAD: Alcohol and Communication

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## Alcohol and Communication 2

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the self-perceptions of college students regarding the effects of alcohol consumption on their interpersonal communication. Forty-seven subjects--the majority being students majoring in health care studies--completed a 52 item Q-sort on alcohol and communication. Four person-types evolved: the social drinker, the nondrinker, the problem drinker, and the insecure drinker. Issues tapped in the Q-sort included: behavioral and perceptual changes, alcohol abuse, media influence, anxiety reduction, family influences, self-disclosure, and social interaction.

Alcohol has been around college students for a long time. Although some adolescents may consume alcohol at home, as Harford and Spigler (1983) explained: "with increasing age more drinking takes place outside of the home setting and is accompanied by increases in the frequency of drinking and in the amount of alcohol typically consumed per occasion" (p. 181). Therefore, we can assume many young adults are increasing their alcohol consumption in social contexts outside the home: at parties, with friends, at a bar, in a restaurant. Although researchers have considered the motivations and influences on alcohol consumption among young people (e.g. Rachal, 1976), one area that may need more attention is examining how alcohol use influences interpersonal interaction among college students.

What are some issues involved in the association of alcohol consumption and interpersonal communication? Does self-reflection indicate differences between types of alcohol consumers? Can differences between consumer types be accounted for on the basis of gender? The purpose of this study was to allow college students a self-examination about how alcohol use affects their interpersonal communication.

Because of its ability to allow self-reflection, a Q-methodological approach was selected. Q-methodology has demonstrated its effectiveness in some 1500 research studies since its conception (Brown, 1986a, p. 72). Despite its use over the past fifty years, as Stephen (1985) explained, "Q-methodology is one of the least known and least understood quantitative methods" (p. 194). Briefly, Q-Methodology is a set of procedures that can be used in studying the subjective nature of things (Aitken, 1988). Although originally designed for research in the field of psychology (e.g. Stephenson, 1953), the method has received widespread use across many disciplines (see McKeown, & Thomas, 1988). Because of Stephenson's training in both the physical and behavioral sciences--a Ph.D. in physics and a Ph.D. in psychology--he developed a method that can serve as the science of subjectivity. As Brown (1986a) wrote: "The first axiom of Q methodology is that it is the subjective self (a primitive and undefined term) that is at the center of all meaning." The concern is for "states of mind" rather than "observables in states" (p. 73).

#### Background

In 1989, the Spuds MacKenzie advertising campaign for Budweiser beer received an "award" for irresponsible advertising. The reason for the "recognition" was that the central character, Spuds, directed the advertising campaign primarily at children. In a time when our society is more and more concerned about alcohol and drug abuse, the influence of media has warranted study. Research already

has shown the potential influence of advertising in drinking behavior (Kohn & Smart, 1984). Atkin, Hocking, and Block (1984), for example, found that young people who see more television and magazine ads for alcohol will drink more than those who see less advertising. The role of the media in alcohol consumption was just one of the communication issues the subjects raised in their interviews for this study. In fact, during the process of developing a Q-sort for this study, several themes emerged from the statements of interviewees. The statements were categorized as follows: behavioral-perceptual change, alcohol abuse, influences of the media, anxiety reduction, family factors, self disclosure, social interaction, and the self.

Although these categories are not comprehensive, they reflect research interests in the literature on alcohol. For example, researchers have studied the motivations for drinking (Carman and others, 1983; Vuchinich & Tucker, 1983; Cox and Klinger, 1988; Cox, 1988; Christiansen, Goldman, & Inn, 1982; Cox & Klinger, 1987). In addition, they have considered abuse in alcohol consumption (e.g. Kilpatrick and others, 1980). Although strategies for change in alcohol abuse (e.g. Perri, 1985), have been considered in the literature, the interviewees did not consider this issue as it related to communication. One important role in drinking is to reduce anxiety in communication events (e.g. Steele & Josephs, 1988), so that alcohol may be used to increase communication interaction. As one would expect, there has been considerable research on the family influences of alcohol use and alcoholism (e.g. Cermak & Brown, 1982; Gravotz & Bowden; Maples, Johnson, and Sandler, 1984; Moos, 1984; Oxford, 1984; Throwe, 1986; Woltitz, 1984; Kaufman, 1984). In this case, however, most of the subjects indicated more concern toward their interaction with peers and friends.

Chassin, Tetzloff, and Hershey (1985) indicated the importance of current drinking behavior as related to self-concept consistency theory and ideal self-concept self-enhancement. Caudill, Wilson, and Abrams (1987) are among the researchers who have indicated that drinking affects one's expectations regarding self-disclosure. More self-disclosure caused by drinking, however, is not necessarily appropriate self-disclosure. Gardner, Willsnack, and Slotnick (1983), for example, found "increased communication from significant others and perceived interpersonal support correlated with reduced student drinking." Effects on self-disclosure are relevant to communication with peers. Hull (1983), Caudill, and Marlatt (1975) and Kastl (1969) have considered just such roles of social interaction in alcohol consumption.

Gender differences have been found in some studies regarding alcohol use. For example, Chassin, Tetzloff, and

Hershey found that consistency and impression management variables influenced boys' intentions to consume alcohol in the future. Girls' intentions failed to relate to self-image or social image factors. In a study by Caudill, Wilson, and Abrams (1987), when couples thought they were intoxicated, men self-disclosed more and women self-disclosed less. Such research has supported the assumption that alcohol consumption can affect interpersonal communication.

#### Method

Subjects. Subjects were 47 volunteers (30 female, 17 male), twenty-five were students (22 health care major, 1 communication major) enrolled in a sophomore level interpersonal communication course. In addition, most students asked a friend or relative to complete the sort. Subjects were aged 19-33. The small sample was consistent with methodological principles (Casey & Graham, 1988). The method has demonstrated effectiveness in analyzing the "phenomenological world of the individual (or of small numbers of individuals) without sacrificing the power of statistical analysis" (Stephen, 1985, p. 193).

Apparatus. Q-methodology incorporates into its philosophical underpinnings the importance of language in our culture. The idea is that the way we talk about a given subject defines our perception of that subject. Stephenson, (1986b) indicated that "Q is based on communication and meaning as reflected in the concourse." By interviewing people and acquiring statements from their common language, we have a vehicle that manifests our culture.

By examining the nature of these statements, one can determine the elements that appear in the concourse that should therefore be included in the Q-sort or "sample." The measure is not normative from the standpoint that it will mean the same thing to everyone, but from the standpoint that the Q-sort statements should evoke meaning from everyone.

Eight students enrolled in an interpersonal communication course volunteered to conduct focused interviews to gather statements for a Q-sort. After being taught basic interviewing techniques, they were instructed to ask for feelings and opinions--not observable facts--about the effects of alcohol consumption on communication interaction. The students were told to interview friends about drinking and record key statements in the words of the interviewees. They could use notetaking or a tape recording techniques, but they were to turn in a list of approximately statements from their interviews.

From the concourse of statements, statements that dealt with the communication issues indicated above were included in the Q-sort. "The key, as Stephenson has pointed out, is in the diversity of the concourse and in the Q sample which

models it" (Brown, 1986c). No changes in language were made, other than correction of severe grammatical errors. The intention was to use the ideas and language of the youth so that the statements would evoke a common meaning among others.

An informal structure was used that represented statements in proportions similar to those found in the Q-concourse (Brenner, 1988, p. 13). The categories themselves had little significance other than making sure the ideas were included. As Brown (1986a) explained:

Statements in a Q sample, unlike items in a conventional rating scale, are not regarded as having a priori meaning, or as being valid measures of a characteristic or trait: Their placement in this or that cell of the design is provisional, and their selection in terms of the structure of the design is for purposes of constructing a Q sample that has the same breadth as the concourse that generated it. (p. 59).

The result was a 52 statement Q-sort (see Appendix 1), an appropriate size for the method (Brown, 1987b, p. 98; Brown, 1986a p. 59). The issue of ratio of Q-sorts to the number of statements in the Q-sample appears of little importance because in Q one does not know how many factors to expect (e.g. Brown, 1986c, Arrindell and Van der Ende, 1985).

The Q-sort is different from most paper-and-pencil measures, in that the respondent sorts statements according to an agree--disagree (pleasure--unpleasure) continuum. Instead of responding with one's degree of agreement to each statement, the respondent sorts each statement to be placed on a grid that shows the relationship between statements. An 11-point scale was used on the agree (pleasure) to disagree (displeasure) continuum.

Although the grid for arrangement of Q-statements can be done in a variety of ways, this Q-sort was arranged in the conventional forced (Brown, 1971), quasi-normal distribution (Brown, 1986a, p. 59). Although a statistical case can be made for quasi-normal distribution (Stephen, 1985), "the forced distribution is a model (of the Law of Error) which is designed to help the Q sorter think about the problem" (Brown, 1986e, p. 66).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed by the most widely used Q program (Stephen, p. 204), Van Tubergen's QUANAL computer program, using varimax rotation, and optimized after eight iterations.



By interpreting the descending array of z-scores and item descriptions for each factor type, a synopsis of each type was compiled. A principal component factor matrix indicated how each person loaded on each factor. The factor loadings and percentages of total variance accounted for by each factor determined the best solution. Consider an application of the process in an explanation by Casey and Graham (1988) regarding interpretation:

In Q-methodology, factor analysis features correlations between each pair of persons (rather than between each pair of items). Each person's array of scores on the [52 in the alcohol Q-sort] statements is thus correlated with each other person's array, leading to a [47 x 47] cell table [2209 cells] upon which the factor analysis is performed. Factor analysis bringing out the underlying similarities in these arrays thus clusters the subjects into like-minded groups (instead of clustering items into factors composed of items which evoke similar responses in the overall group of subjects)...We account for the clustered viewpoints (i.e., factors) by careful examination of the typical arrays of the factors, and here we benefit from the variety of statements from different realms of thought selected for the Q-sample. We reconstruct the Q-sort most typical of each factor, which is the pooled outlook of those subjects (and of other subjects contributing to that factor). This outlook reflects how an identifiable segment...actively thinks about the issue in the sense of wrestling with, assembling, and juxtaposing various ideas, notions, concepts, factual observations, epigrams, and symbols into a meaningful viewpoint. p. 7.

The role of the nine categories was also considered in the final results. As Brown (1986c) clarified: "The ultimate test of a factor in Q is not the number of statements, but whether the Q sorts (hence the factors which they produce) are schematic, i.e., whether each Q sort makes sense and is homologous with what the person wants to say" (p. 97). To determine significant factor loadings ( $p < .01$  level) the standard error was computed for a zero correlation coefficient:  $SE = 1/\sqrt{n}$ , where  $n$  = number of statements (Mauldin, 1987, p. 3).

Brown described the aim in Q-methodology as not one "to generalize facts to broad populations, as a matter of statistical induction....It has always been the case in Q that generalizations apply to persons of the same type, irrespective of the numbers of persons belonging to the type" (Brown, 1986d, pp. 69-70). One final comment should be made about the "ipsative sidetrack" regarding Q-sorting. Some researchers have mistakenly thought that Q involves a



reanalysis of a transposed R matrix, when in fact Q is "a singly-centered matrix of its own" (Brown, 1988).

### Results and Discussion

Does self-reflection indicate differences between types of alcohol consumers? Apparently so. The best solution appeared to be a three factor one--which accounted for 45 percent of the total variance--using factors with eigen values above the usual criterion value of 1.0. Below is a summary of the three factors. Of the 47 respondents, 45 emerged on one of the three factors:

- Type 1 = 32 persons
- Type 2 = 7 (positive)
- Type 2 = 3 (negative)
- Type 3 = 3

Type one and type three had a clear correlation (.529). Of the forty-seven subjects in the study, two failed to load significantly on any of the three factors.

Type 1: The Social Drinker. These subjects like to drink socially, but believe in moderation. Alcohol is not necessary for a good time, in fact, it's a bad idea in business situations. Drinking can, however, help students feel more relaxed and freer to talk to others. In general, alcohol is a communication vehicle. Alcohol should not be used as an escape. These students' parents are not big drinkers. Views about drinking have changed among these subjects during the past years. They have negative views about drunkenness, but seem to view people who drink to excess in a warm, good-hearted fashion. They look at drinking in an adaptive way regarding communication. Thirty-two subjects loaded significantly on this type.

Type 2: The Nondrinker. One might expect the nondrinker to be a person who has been raised with values against drinking. They perceive alcohol as having adverse effects on communication. The biggest difference between this and other types is the nondrinker's agreement with the statement "My views on drinking have not changed over the past ten years." Thus, the types' attitudes are stable. Both type one and type three disagreed with that statement. Some of these nondrinkers may have come into direct contact with alcohol abuse that has turned them against drinking, as indicated by their greater tendency to select "A person who has been drinking heavily becomes sadistic and antagonistic....Children or spouses of people who drink heavily become very self-conscious....and...Heavy drinkers verbally abuse their family and loved ones." If they are from alcoholic households, however, most of these subjects apparently have nondrinking parents because of their greater inclination to disagree with the statement "My parents always drink when they go out." The one student who said her step-father is an alcoholic loaded on type one, but the friend outside of the course she had complete the Q-sort

loaded on type two. Thus, no correlation can be made between this type and their motivation. Although such a leap to the motivations of these subjects is probably inappropriate, one can see their negative perception about drinking.

Type two persons think it is a mistake to "release" through alcohol, and they hate to meet people who are "plastered." Nondrinkers command more respect than drinkers. They seem disinclined to drink because others are drinking, are "turned off" by drinkers, don't believe in serving minors, and disapprove of using alcohol to get over the rough spots. Seven subjects loaded positively on this type and three loaded negatively.

Negative Type Two: The Problem Drinker. The students who loaded negatively on factor two reported that they "loved to party." To them, alcohol makes communication happen.

Type 3: The Insecure Drinker. For these students, alcohol creates some turmoil in their communication. These drinkers seem less assertive, less self-confident, and more influenced by external sources. They are curious about becoming drunk. Although alcohol makes them feel more comfortable talking to strangers, they still feel self-conscious when drinking. They seem unsure of what alcohol does to themselves and others, believing that alcohol causes distortion in communication. These students have a mix of responses. Two students who loaded positively on this type indicated that although drinking was against their religion and against their parents' beliefs, they were "social drinkers." One way that this type differs from type one is that unlike type one, these youth are unable to tell friends when they are too drunk to drive. Two students loaded positively and one loaded negatively on this type.

What are some issues involved in the association of alcohol consumption and interpersonal communication? In analyzing the nine categories, the ten most agree and ten most disagree statements for each of the three factors were compared according to the issues by using a Chi Square for Independence. Because there was no significant difference between types, we can assume that the various issues are equally important in determining feelings about drinking alcohol.

Behavioral and Perceptual Changes. Eight statements (1, 2, 5, 25, 27, 40, 46, 49) indicated some kind of behavioral or perceptual change caused by alcohol. One can interpret six of those eight statements to reflect negative changes. Factor two (nondrinker) and three (insecure drinker) agreed with "Alcohol creates a false sense of courage." Factor one (social drinker) and three agreed that "Drinking tends to lower one's inhibitions and reluctance." Factor two was more inclined than the other types to agree

that "How I perceive someone is changed by noticing the type of drink they are drinking." The issue of behavioral and perceptual changes appeared least important to type 2, perhaps because of less direct experience or less awareness of potential changes.

Alcohol Abuse. Seven statements (11, 22, 29, 35, 38, 42, 51) could be categorized as related to issues of alcohol abuse, such as "At high school and college parties people who get drunk are better accepted than those who do not drink." The issue of alcohol abuse appears most important to type 2.

Influences of the Media. Two statements (24 and 33) reflected a concern over media issues. Factor one did not feel media was particularly important. Factor two agreed with the statement: "I feel that the media has a major effect on people's drinking habits. I've seen people try to do some stupid things they've seen on television." Factor three was more inclined to think "Some commercials and media make me feel like my life would be more glamorous if I drink."

Anxiety Reduction. Three statements related to the concept of anxiety reduction, including using alcohol to lessen the discomfort of social situations (e.g. 28, 10, 21). The statement "I usually am not as nervous when I meet someone for the first time if I've had a drink" typifies this issue. Drinking to reduce communication apprehension appears most important to type one, indicating a possible motivation for the social drinker.

Family Factors. Family factors (3, 6, 7, 8, 37) appear more important to type 2 (nondrinker) subjects than the other types, which may also help explain their position.

Self-disclosure. Seven statements (4, 9, 14, 16, 19, 39, 52) can be categorized as relevant to the issue of self-disclosure. The self-disclosure theme appears most important to type three subjects, as evidenced by their greater inclination to agree with the statements: "When I drink, I feel more open and comfortable talking to strangers....It's not smart for teenagers and young adults to release all their inhibitions with alcohol...and I become less attentive to others the more I drink."

Social Interaction. The large number of statements (12, 15, 17, 18, 23, 32, 36, 41, 44, 47, 50) that related to this issue mirror its importance to the students collecting statements for the Q-sort. Type one (the social drinker) was more inclined than the others to disagree with the statement "Drinking helps relationships over troubled times." Type two (the nondrinker) was more inclined than the other types to disagree with the statement "Bars or parties are good places to get rowdy, meet with friends, and blow off school."

**Self.** Seven statements (13, 20, 26, 30, 34, 45, 48) related to the sense of self. On the statement "My views on drinking have not changed over the past ten years," type one and three both disagreed with the statement. Type two agreed with "I feel people have more respect for people who don't drink than for those who do drink" and disagreed with "I am more warm-hearted when drinking." The issue of self appears most important to the type 3 respondent.

**Gender.** Only two statements (31 and 43) related to gender issues. Type two was more inclined to disagree with the statement "Guys drink socially because it's something that's been passed along time--a guy goes out to have a drink with the boys." Type two was more inclined to agree and type three was more inclined than the others to disagree with the statement "Women are less affected by peer pressure (to drink)." Can differences between consumer types be accounted for on the basis of gender? In this study, there was no significant difference in factor loadings that could not be accounted for based on gender.

Apparently college students have several self-referenced points of view on the association between alcohol and communication. Although the person-types found in this study--the social drinker, the nondrinker, the problem drinker, and the insecure drinker--cannot account for every college student's feelings about alcohol, they indicate distinctly different views toward the role of alcohol in communication.

As Stephenson (1987) explained: "The Q sorts, however, are not testable hypotheses: Instead, they are hypothesis-inductive. Conditions of so-called mind are so complex that only after analysis, after the effect, can we determine which laws, if any, were at issue" (p. 25). Thus, the study leads to more questions about what concepts are at issue regarding alcohol consumption and communication. One hypothesis is that a reduction of anxiety, escapism, peer acceptance, and a means of greasing the wheels of communication are the key communication issues reflected by the students' statements.

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Table 1: Q-Sort Distribution

	Most Disagree						Most Agree				
Value	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
Frequency	2	3	5	6	6	8	6	6	5	3	2

**Appendix 1: Complete Array of Statements, Ranked by the Type of Respondent**

Statements	Type's Z Scores		
	1	2	3
1. When people drink heavily, they become hostile and belligerent.	-0.7	0.7	0.1
2. A person who has been drinking heavily becomes sadistic and antagonistic.	0.3	0.8	1.0
3. Children or spouses of people who drink heavily become very self-conscious.	0.2	1.1	-0.6
4. Alcohol reduces inhibitions in communication.	1.8	-0.5	0.2
5. Alcohol creates a false sense of courage.	0.6	1.2	2.0
6. Drinking alcohol causes a person to say thing they don't mean.	0.0	0.5	0.8
7. Consumption of alcohol strains the relationship between a husband and a wife (boyfriend-girlfriend).	0.6	1.3	-0.0
8. Heavy drinkers verbally abuse their family and loved ones.	0.0	1.5	0.5
9. When you meet a person who has been drinking, you are not meeting the real person.	-0.1	1.0	0.5
10. I don't like to drink that much, but I feel like I stand out too much if there's not a glass in my hand.	-1.0	-1.2	-0.5
11. When someone is drunk, I don't even try to talk to them.	-0.7	0.8	-1.1
12. I would go to a big party even though no alcohol would be served.	1.6	1.7	1.3
13. I become less self-conscious after drinking.	1.0	-0.3	1.8
14. When I drink, I feel more open and comfortable talking to strangers.	0.8	-0.6	1.1
15. Bars (parties) are good places to get rowdy, meet with friends, and blow off school.	1.1	-1.2	0.1
16. Alcohol can help communication, but too much can be disastrous on communication.	2.0	-0.1	1.5
17. In a restaurant, alcohol helps create a mood for serious conversation.	-1.1	-1.2	-0.9
18. On first impression, if someone			

# Alcohol and Communication 18

	has alcohol breath, it turns me off so I'm not interested in pursuing the conversation.	-0.2	1.1	-0.3
19.	It's not smart for teenagers and young adults to release all their inhibitions with alcohol.	1.4	1.5	1.7
20.	My views on drinking have not changed over the past ten years.	-2.2	0.5	1.2
21.	I usually am not as nervous when I meet someone for the first time if I've had a drink	0.2	-0.7	0.2
22.	I hate to meet people who are plastered.	0.9	1.5	0.9
23.	Drinking effects my perception of people.	-0.2	-0.1	1.3
24.	Some commercials and media make me feel like my life would be more glamorous if I drink.	-0.4	-0.3	0.3
25.	My ideas about people seem distorted if I've had a lot to drink.	-0.4	-0.2	0.8
26.	Drinking is bad for your image.	-0.8	0.7	0.7
27.	Drinking tends to lower one's inhibitions and reluctance.	1.5	0.6	1.4
28.	In most experiences with people who are drinking, I find that they tend to become more relaxed and interact with those around them more.	1.5	-0.3	1.0
29.	If one of my good friends drinks excessively and acts really stupid every once in a while, my opinion of them doesn't change.	0.8	-1.0	-0.8
30.	When I drink I tend to become an extrovert.	0.5	-0.8	-0.4
31.	Guys drink socially because it's something that's been passed along time--a guy goes out to have a drink with the boys.	0.8	-0.2	-0.2
32.	I feel that alcohol isn't such a great idea when conducting business negotiations--one should be level-headed when doing so.	1.5	1.4	0.8
33.	I feel that the media has a major effect on people's drinking habits. I've seen people try to do some stupid things they've seen on t.v.	-0.2	0.9	-0.1
34.	I used to cling to my drink at parties because I was insecure, but now I can drink or not drink at parties. I don't feel like it necessary.	0.0	-0.4	0.1
35.	It's hard to tell a person that			

# Alcohol and Communication 19

	they are too drunk to drive.	-0.9	-0.6	0.6
36.	When at a bar, a drink is sometimes the only thing in common with other people.	-0.1	-0.8	0.7
37.	My parents always drink when they go out.	-1.4	-1.8	-1.8
38.	People seem to find imaginary friends when drunk and talk to them.	-1.1	-0.0	-1.6
39.	Drinking is a communication medium.	1.1	-1.4	-1.1
40.	When I drink I tend to be less tactful.	-0.2	-0.2	-0.8
41.	It is sometimes awkward to talk to someone who has had a few drinks when I am sober.	0.0	1.0	-1.2
42.	I sometimes wonder what it would be like to get drunk. I wonder how I would communicate in that situation.	-1.3	-0.9	1.2
43.	Women are less affected by peer pressure (to drink).	-0.5	-0.3	-1.3
44.	It is okay to serve alcohol to minors who have graduated from high school but not to high schoolers because of their maturity.	-1.2	-2.1	0.5
45.	I feel people have more respect for people who don't drink than for those who do drink.	0.3	1.5	-0.6
46.	How I perceive someone is changed by noticing the type of drink they are drinking.	-1.3	0.2	-1.5
47.	Drinking helps relationships over troubled times.	-2.6	-2.4	-1.6
48.	I am more warm-hearted when drinking.	0.4	-0.8	-1.2
49.	I am more likely to lie if I have been drinking.	-0.9	-0.3	-0.7
50.	People who do not drink at bars or parties are viewed as conservative and not as social.	0.4	-0.4	-1.0
51.	At high school and college parties people who get drunk are better accepted than those who do not drink.	-0.6	-0.7	0.7
52.	I become less attentive to others the more I drink.	-0.4	-0.1	0.3